

At Toronto rally on climate change, embattled prime minister tries to keep things from overheating

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Body

As the caper to a two-pronged day of rallies to cheer on the Liberal climate agenda, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Monday night stop at the Danforth Music Hall in Toronto had already been slightly upstaged by the resignation of Jane Philpott from his cabinet earlier in the day.

If the fallout from alleged interference by the Prime Minister's Office in criminal proceedings against SNC-Lavalin and last week's testimony from former attorney-general Jody Wilson-Raybould on the matter to the Commons Justice Committee looked to be ongoing, however, Trudeau resolutely stayed on message at the Music Hall. ("It shouldn't be free to pollute anywhere in the country"). But he did acknowledge the elephant thundering about the room off the top of his speech.

"While I am disappointed, I understand her decision to step down and I want to thank her for her service," he said of Philpott, who removed herself from her position as Treasury Board president on Monday, saying she had "lost confidence" in the Trudeau government over its handling of the SNC-Lavalin matter.

Trudeau was praising her efforts in removing boil-water advisories on reserves and pursuing "next gen" solutions to climate change when the first protester of the evening piped up to call attention to a potential chink in the Liberal's climate-action plan: the Canadian government's acquisition of the soon-to-be-expanded Trans-Mountain pipeline. Those pipeline plans have caused a disconnect between the government's professed desire to repair institutional relations with Indigenous peoples, and the unwillingness of many of those peoples to let pipelines pass through their territories.

"I remember when you bought a pipeline!" "Stop Canadian genocide!" Such cries erupted often during Trudeau's speech, and a proper shoving match ensued on the floor when a protester threw what appeared to be a scarf towards the podium.

At least two people were forcibly escorted from the Music Hall by police and security. But they didn't pose much of a threat to the highly partisan mood in a room that included 19 Ontario Liberal MPs — Toronto-Danforth representative Julie Dabrusin, Environment Minister Catherine McKenna ("We are a team," she said during her own time at the podium. "We stand together") and Finance Minister Bill Morneau among them. The crowd optimistically pegged at 1,000 tended to drown out any shouts of complaint with chants of "Trudeau! Trudeau! Trudeau!"

"That's what democracy is about: the opportunity to share a wide variety of opinions," said Trudeau, keeping his cool during the flare-ups but also tilting a little more loudly and decisively towards electioneering mode as the evening wore on and such Liberal accomplishments as the child tax benefit and "the lowest unemployment in 40 years" crept into the script.

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Still, overall, the evening's refrain was that the Liberals are the only federal party in a real position to do something against the forces of climate change and "we don't have a moment to spare." Ontario Premier Doug Ford — a noted public enemy of the Liberal carbon tax — did get a veiled acknowledgement in the PM's remark that forward thinking on solving the problem of climate change "is not about fighting progress in court," but most of Trudeau's environmental ire on the night was reserved for Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer.

"And yet, in spite of the evidence, some politicians still don't get it. Believe it or not, there are some who think we should do nothing on climate change," said Trudeau. "It was in April of last year that Andrew Scheer announced he would soon be unveiling his climate-change plan. Well, here we are in March of 2019 — 309 days later — and he has released nothing ...

"If you don't have a plan for climate change, then you don't have a plan for the economy and you certainly don't have a plan for Canada's future."

Trudeau left swiftly and did not make himself available to the many reporters with questions about things other than the Liberal climate-action plan on their minds.

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